

**Tape #64**  
**Interview with Jesse Thompson**  
**Date: 8/30/08**  
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**Checked by**

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**(0:44)**

**CD:** Jesse, could you describe the scene at battleship row when you saw it? What it looked like?

**JT:** Well I think , I, um, the first plane I saw might have been the first torpedo release and it hit the West Virginia. Um, I'm assuming it hit the West Virginia, 'cause it flew over the West Virginia and Tennessee when I had seen it. And I had sort of, uh, I was, uh, standing at near the bow of the Tennessee, and I just looked up there and ,uh, the... The planes those Kate torpedo planes were very slow you know, um, they had a pilot and, uh, at least two in each, each I think, Kates, maybe three, but two I think. Uh, could be wrong. The, uh, I looked up, it was probably forty feet above my head. And I was, I was basically looked up and when I saw this plane, I was between the plane and Battleship Row which would be the Maryland and the, or I take that back, the Tennessee and the West Virginia there. And I looked up in the air, and the pilot was looking back over his shoulder probably to see if he had **(2:00)** made a hit. Or see the reactions of his release of the torpedo. And I was standing right between him and the ships. Uh, and he saw me and I could see his face, I could see his face. Just for a second. He wasn't interested in me, he was interested in what was your reaction of his, uh, torpedo. And uh, just for a vague moment I saw, I saw the uh, a pilot up there. And uh, I think he must of seen me. Couldn't of missed me standing right where I was with the picture I showed you. You could see that there was not a lot of room. I'd be right there where he could see me out in the open. Uh, that, so I...as I watched that and watched several other planes come by, uh, I don't recall the, I don't recall the Arizona exploding, it was one battleship away uh, it seemed like I would have, but that was at 8:10 and maybe by 8:05 or so, **(03:00)** because it started at about 5 of and I ran in the house and got dressed so that had to take, that had to take a few minutes, 8, 5, so I must have just approximately 8:10 headed the other direction away from the Arizona. So we ran but we were so occupied with di-, di-, diving under porches and hiding behind trees and uh, getting to the building where we were headed uh, that uh, that occupied most of our attention just get where we were going. You weren't then, you weren't so much aware of what was happening on the ships you just were, worried about getting where you were suppose to be. And that's all I can recall of that, and I remember finally getting there and they just said 'get under the tables' so we, we dove under the tables and we stayed for the first raid.

**03:58**

**CD:** What thoughts went through your mind when you saw that Japanese pilot

and plane?

**JT:** Well immediately I knew what was happening, that was the first though, it's the Japanese. Because uh, I had mentioned previously we had been delayed oh, four months or so prior to being released and oked to come to Hawaii and uh, and to Pearl Harbor. The uh, so knew immediately why and uh, I said, this happened, it happened and that was my reaction, it, it, it really happened so uh, without any hesitation I knew as soon as I saw that first plane. That's why you sometimes hear stories of people saying, oh I thought it was maneuvers on a Sunday, why would they do it on a Sunday and so forth, I've heard that often from people that, but they may have been off a little farther away across the bay or something **(05:00)** across the channel, yeah. But, that was my, immediately I knew what happened,

**05:07**

**CD:** Where you scared?

**JT:** I don't remember being scared, you just sorta react, we were with a navy person and we were being, as we were running we were being told where to go and you just react and that's the military training part, but I wasn't in the military, so I just joined in, just did what I was told to do, 'get going' 'duck' and uh, uh that's, I just reacted, and I don't remember being frightened at that time but that night, I mentioned earlier that uh, that night I was frightened when all the fire works and I was on the floor and I just shook and shook and shook and shook and just fell asleep, I don't know how long I did that. But I don't recall being frightened during the attack itself **(06:00)**. Maybe I did but uh, maybe I was frightened, but mostly you react, that's probably why, why they train so vigorously when people go through military training and all, make it automatic, make it automatic, make it automatic. But I wasn't in the military, I was with so military people. There were others doing the same thing that we were doing, running from that location down to the other end of the island.

**06:27**

**CD:** Were you concerned about your mother and father?

**JT:** No because I, (coughs) I knew they were in town and uh, the uh, but I didn't know how town was doing, but they weren't there at the base. My dad was 38 at the time so he had to get back to his ship and that's what most of the elderly service people, elderly service men did, they had to get back **(07:00)**. Most of them, I mean there were exceptions to this because you had to have com-, you had to have command and so forth, but most of the people at Pearl at that particular time were younger, except for your commanding officers and so forth like that and they may have had the duty. And so the older ones that had families and so forth had to get back to their ship. Now I know that the Japanese uh, because the Japanese Zeros had very little air opposition, so they were released to start strafing, so we were strafed on the way down to, to where we were going, that's why we had to jump, to hide under porches and behind trees uh, uh, so I know the strafing was done so the Japanese were just released and do a lot

of this strafing and those that were trying to get back to their ships were strafed, my dad was strafed trying to get back to the Curtis he was on, it was out in the center of the **(08:00)** channel, on the other side of the island from Battleship Row.

**08:05**

**CD:** That's just what I was about to ask you is um, what was your dad's rank and what was his ship and what was his job? If you could just...

**JT:** My dad was, my dad was a chief yeoman and he was the commanding officer's yeoman, so he was a, basically you might say he was a, oh, I remember uh, going into commissioning, I was aboard the ship uh, for Christmas so I had been on board ship several times and my dad was basically the lead chief aboard the ship. The uh, and as I mentioned he was the skipper's the captain's personal yeoman, yeoman is like a secretary but he was **(09:00)** uh, he was the skipper's yeoman there. So uh, I enjoyed the Curtis, I identified a lot with the Curtis, because my dad was on the Curtis, but he was on, I remember other ships he was on and the other station like the navel-operating base in Norwalk, Virginia, USS Barney stationed in San Diego, USS Doowy stationed, in the early 30s and I use to go aboard those ships. Um, but uh, after uh, after our uh, oh I forgot, I lost my train of thought. Could you cut?

**09:37**

**CD:** We're good.

**JT:** So you mentioned, what was that again?

**CD:** Well I asked you about your dad, but I think you did a great job answering that.

**JT:** Oh yeah, ok.

**CD:** I think that's perfect information.

(crew talks)

**10:14**

**CD:** When you finally did get to see Battleship Row and recognize, able to take it in and what had happened could you describe the scene and your feelings of watching, of seeing that scene?

**10:27**

**JT:** Well I had mentioned that I had, I had just seen, the, I had just witnessed the torpedo plane that probably, well it hit the, hit the uh, what battleship was that again, I lost my train of thought again. We had the Maryland, the Oklahoma, the West Virginia, it was the West Virginia, fly over and I immediately knew what was happening then.

**10:58**

**CD:** Right but after, after the attack was over, the next day.

**JT:** Oh over.

**CD:** The next day when you came back to your house.

**JT:** Oh that was Wednesday, three days later.

**CD:** Right, could you describe the scene in the aftermath and what you were thinking about and what you felt seeing that scene?

**11:15**

**JT:** The scene at uh, Pearl Harbor?

**CD:** Battleship Row, Pearl Harbor.

**JT:** Well, I don't recall, we didn't talk much about it, we just sort of got focused on living again. Because people did not spend a lot of time discussing Pearl Harbor for too many, for too many days after that. I can remember uh, getting back and going through college uh and high school, and no one even knew I was at Pearl Harbor and then in the 1990s, I'd bump into people because I used to be the parade chairman for our **(12:00)** local chapter uh, and I would go out and speak about Pearl Harbor. The um, um, I do not remember people talking so, it was about 1958 before people started talking again about Pearl Harbor or their experiences and that's when the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association was established, in 1958. And then people started recounting their, their uh, duties and their experiences at, at Pearl Harbor. And we formed speakers bureaus and so forth. But for a while no one talked about those experiences, that happened I guess all during the war, you didn't see much talk about, it was all more a positive kind of thing, more revenge, get the Japanese, we, we had signs all over the place 'get the Japanese' 'kill them' that's basically how **(13:00)** and that was the propaganda techniques that we used by the US government to get everyone involved in uh, in working and uh, the uh. Just overwhelm Japan, that was, Japan knew they had a long war they'd lose, they'd basically lose if it was a long war, that's why they wanted 6 months and get all the territory they could in the Western Pacific because they wanted the Western Pacific. Uh, and they were concerned, one of their concerns was there was too many Europeans in the Western Pacific. The Germans were there in the Carolin Islands uh, uh, the uh, the Marshall Islands, those were Germans, the British were in uh, Malaysia and Singapore and Hong Kong and the Americans were in the Philippines and the French were there uh, **(14:00)**. They were concerned about the Western Pacific not being Asian and being more European, so that was one of their concerns. The other major concern about the Japanese was you know, one of their big concerns was their lack of raw materials particularly oil. And uh, so that was their problems, and they had a lot of people to feed, the Japanese had approximately 80 million people in Japan, and you'd take up the Empire of Japan and the islands that make up the Empire of Japan um, they were about the same

size as the state of California and today in the state of California we have 38 million people and Japan had approximately 80 million people, 80 million, so they had a problem, they had to feed those people supply them so, requires, and Japan had very little in raw materials that's why they started taking territories and taking Korea in 1910 **(15:00)**, Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937 and the Camen Islands in 39, French-Indo China, which was then Vietnam in 1941. Those areas had the materials that they needed.

**15:17**

**CD:** Did you lose any ... (background talking)

**15:40**

**CD:** Did you lose any friends that day?

**JT:** No, as a matter of fact, we were told, we were told, in the area that we were staying in, in the galley, eating galley, the uh, to duck under tables which we did, **(16:00)** get under and take cover and, cover your head because there is flying glass coming through, flying all around. Uh, I remember one occasion, some stood up and was looking out to see the action outside in the harbor, and he got hit by a bullet, it, he was eight, ten feet away from me. I was under the table looking, and he was up standing looking out and cckkkk he got hit right in the chest and I don't know what happened to him, the just carted him away. But that was the only one close to me from where I was, I mean when I was, when I was back in the barracks where we were staying or the CPO quarters, I know people riding the ships were probably really hurting and on the way down we were being strafed, but I didn't actually see anyone **(17:00)** or know anyone that got hit. Other than that one fella who was in the cafeteria.

**17:08**

**CD:** Very good. Have you been back to the Arizona Memorial?

**JT:** No, the last time I was at the, in Hawaii was January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1952. I was playing football for San Diego State, we played in the Pineapple Bowl and they did not have the Arizona Memorial then. I guess the memorial came in 1963 so uh, so that's been my last appearance 1952. You know, to Hawaii. I've had the opportunity to go several times but uh, I didn't go, I'm not much of a traveler.

**17:48**

**CD:** When, when you think about that day what's your clearest, most vivid memory?

**JT:** I guess uh, **(18:00)** seeing that first plane, the Kate torpedo plane 'cause right then I immediately knew what was happening. And uh, to me, and again I'll repeat this that we were delayed so many times going over there so, and I knew why we were delayed, so as soon as I saw that plane I said 'this is it. It happened'. And then from then on we just reacted, ran back into the house and got dressed, ran down to the uh, large building on the other end of the island, the barracks and eating galley and uh, uh, reacting after the uh, after the attack

was over. You know the Japanese planned a third raid, you probably know that, they uh, the first two raids were to **(19:00)** get the large ships because those were the ships that could stop them from getting what they wanted in the South Pacific, South China Sea. The third raid was to get the onshore facilities, shipyard, they hardly touched the shipyard, oil storage tanks, hardly touched the oil storage tanks, well they didn't touch them at all that would have been disaster...

**19:23**

**CD:** I going to have to stop you there because of traffic outside. (background noise)

**21:04**

**CD:** Jesse, if you could talk about what the third wave was for again.

**JT:** Oh, the uh, the third raid was to get the onshore facilities as opposed to the off shore facilities, you know the ships would be the off shore facilities, to get the onshore facilities. And the three major locations were the oil storage tanks, that was our oil supply for the whole Pacific Ocean and that would have been, that would have been disastrous if they would have come back and hit, and destroyed all those, oh the oil and the smoke and replacing the oil and replacing the tanks, maybe the war would have gone on another year or so because that was our most westerly outpost. And then the other location was the uh, shipyards. Uh, **(22:00)** of the 80, of the 18 of the sunk or heavily damaged ships all but five got back into the war, even though they were sunk, well sunk at Pearl Harbor 40 feet so you could raise them so ships like the West Virginia, the California, they restored, the Nevada. They repaired them at the shipyards enough to get to Remington, Washington or the Mare Island, to Long Beach for ship repair and they were, more powerful than when they were before Pearl Harbor uh, with newer alignments and so forth. The uh, so we had that and the other area that wasn't touched was the submarine base. Now, we actually only had four subs there but, our submarines you don't hear to much about but our submarines did an outstanding job during the war, we sank uh, **(23:00)** oh I think it was 13, 1,352 Japanese, 1,314 I think, I try and remember all these numbers 1,314, one thousand three hundred and fourteen Japanese ships and additional those were the supply ships basically and then uh, we additionally sank, our submarines sank 201 Japanese navy ships. One of the problems that Japan had during the war was supplies, getting supplies to their, to their South Sea locations and so forth, while we just kept, overwhelmed them with supplies. I don't know if you know this but uh, um, when the war started, well in 1940 the United States had 1,999 ships of all types and the Japanese knew this, they could not compete if it was a long war. **(24:00)** At the end of the war, in 1945, we had 68,952 ships to Japan, we just completely overwhelmed them. But the Japanese just thought that the American people would give up, uh just give up, and say well, the Japanese did not intend to invade the United States. The idea was to get the United States to quit because it would be to overwhelming to take all the islands back, uh the had the whole Western Pacific under their control and the idea was to keep the Western Pacific and the United States would say 'ok you can keep the Western

Pacific, we'll stay in the Eastern Pacific' and basically that was the goal of the Japanese. But, remember Pearl Harbor, that was the motto we had that lasted all during the war, it was on everything, and we just completely overwhelmed them **(25:00)**. They had less raw materials, less metal, less food, than before the war.

**25:08**

**CD:** What's the lesson of Pearl Harbor today for us?

**JT:** The lesson of Pearl Harbor. Well our theme is 'remember Pearl Harbor, keep America alert' so it could happen again and what happened we had mentioned that for a long time before 9/11 and what happened? 9/11 happened, America got struck again, we were not alert and, and that's our theme and that's what we try to do as long as we can. We talk to schools and so forth, I think I mentioned to you earlier that locally we have talked to over 88, as of, I keep all the records, the uh, as of June 30<sup>th</sup> we have spoken to, our records, probably much more than this, but 88,403 I think, **(26:00)** 88,406 that was, as I recall. And we speak to 4 or 5 thousand a year, mostly high schools, but navy personnel and whoever will listen, we try to get the word out. That's our, remember Pearl Harbor, as long as we can.

**26:21**

**CD:** Jesse, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that day and of your experiences of that day, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 that you think are important, that you wanna share?

**26:34**

**JT:** I think you pretty well covered everything I can think of, lets see. Uh, the experience, the experience of surviving there, for me personally, helped me through out my life. Uh, I had mentioned this earlier that I had to start school again, but all that experience I think was good for me **(27:00)** growing up. My goal, like most of the people I associated with during the war years, now if you were in high school during the war years you could work in defense factories and uh, I worked at North Island for two years, two summers not two years and on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the said Japan has surrendered, so everyone left their job...

**27:29**

**CD:** I need to stop you there. (background noise)

**27:46**

**CD:** How did Pearl Harbor, surviving Pearl Harbor shape you and, yeah?  
(background noise)

**28:41**

**CD:** How has surviving Pearl Harbor affected your life?

**JT:** Well, um, I think that experience uh taught me that uh, there are some **(29:00)** very important things we do in life and they all can be accomplished and, and just surviving that experience um, even though I didn't talk about it

right, I never talked about it at all until the 1990s but uh, um the experience made me more mature I think, and I had mentioned that uh, as a result of Pearl Harbor I had to go back and repeat the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, which was good for me. So that kind of thing I think, and I've always, my goal when I was all through high school and my buddies to, I went to a private catholic high school St. Augustine High School, all boys. And during the war years, our goal, everyone I knew couldn't wait to graduate from high school so they could get into the service **(30:00)**, couldn't wait, and that was always my goal because I was brought up in a navy family. And uh, when the war was over and we all left our jobs at the, North Island and all over San Diego for that matter the people mostly gathered downtown by what we call Horton Plaza and uh, I can remember the fella I was standing next to uh, he was a school mate, a classmate of mine and uh he said to me, there were military people, sailor people standing around and so forth, and we were watching these ladies they were on their way to work, they heard the war was over they jumped into the fountain and I ended up holding one of their sweater so uh, um, the uh, this friend of mine said 'I'm glad the war's over but I'm disappointed that I didn't get to go' and that was the feeling of just about everyone that I knew **(31:00)**. All through high school, oh boy can't wait to go in the service, so that was always my goal and by the time we got to go they were really disbanding everyone and they didn't really want you and by that time I had a pretty good athletic career in high school so I got uh, got a scholarship, a few scholarship offers and went to college, so I never did get into the navy. Uh, I guess that's it.

**31:34**

**CD:** Thank you so much.

**JT:** Well thank you.

**CD:** I think you served the navy well that day.

**31:44**

End!